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Asbestos to be removed free from 600 places

By KATY READ
West Bank bureau

An asbestos-laced paving material that a Marrero company used to dole out by the truckload was so cheap and plentiful that longtime West Bank residents remember pouring it on their lawns to make driveways, playing in it, and using it as fill.

That was 30 to 40 years ago,

when few realized how dangerous asbestos might be. But Thursday, hundreds of residents at public meetings in Marrero, Gretna and Westwego learned that government environmental officials consider the material — now aging pavement that's starting to crack and crumble — a serious health risk.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state

Department of Environmental Quality plan to remove the asbestos-containing driveways and other pavement from at least 600 sites across the West Bank beginning next month. The cleanup will cost an estimated \$5.75 million in Superfund money. Services will be free for residents.

The sites include homes, a

See SITES, A-4



West Bank residents listen to George Pettigrew, of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, while he discusses health concerns about the asbestos-driveway removal project Thursday at Ames Elementary in Marrero.

STAFF PHOTO BY JENNIFER ZDON

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day-care center and three schools: St. Joseph School in Gretna, Gretna No. 2 Kindergarten and Immaculata High School in Marrero, Betty Williamson, an EPA official, said. Earlier this week, another EPA official had reported incorrectly that all of the sites were homes.

At Gretna No. 2 Kindergarten, the affected area has been roped off and covered with plastic, and children aren't being allowed in the area, said Frank Davis, chief financial officer for Jefferson Parish Schools. Officials from the other schools couldn't be reached late Thursday.

EPA officials say they expect to find more sites as the project gets under way.

The material was produced as a byproduct by the now-closed Johns-Manville factory in Marrero. As it continues to deteriorate, officials said, it could release asbestos fibers into the air.

Though asbestos isn't considered hazardous as long as it's intact, airborne asbestos has been found to cause a wide range of severe and sometimes fatal respiratory problems. But the pavement on the West Bank has started deteriorating only recently, officials say, and therefore probably hasn't exposed residents to enough asbestos to have harmed them.

At the meeting in Ames Elementary School in Marrero, just a few blocks from the former Manville plant, residents remembered how, back in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, the material they used to call "scrap" seemed to be just about everywhere. Manville sold it cheap — a couple of dollars a truckload, some recalled — just to get rid of it.

ASBESTOS FACTS

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is the name applied to fibrous minerals that were used in a wide range of products, such as building materials and heat-resistant fabrics, before the 1970s.

How can asbestos affect my health?

Little information exists on the health effects of asbestos in people who didn't work around it. Among industrial workers exposed to high levels, asbestos can cause asbestosis, a disease in which scar-like tissue forms in the lungs, and can increase chances of getting lung cancer and mesothelioma.

Is the asbestos in the West Bank pavement areas dangerous?

So far, officials say, residents probably have not been exposed to enough asbestos fibers from the pavement areas to sustain lung damage. However, the driveways do pose a potential health threat as the material continues to deteriorate.

Because the material poses little threat if it is not disturbed, officials recommend that residents avoid disturbing the material, and keep children and pets from playing on it. Residents are warned not to try removing the material themselves.

Where can I get more information?

Contact one of these people:

► Robert J. Starszak, Louisiana Office of Public Health, Section of Environmental Epidemiology and Toxicology, (504) 568-8537.

► Verne McFarland, community relations coordinator, EPA, (800) 533-3508.

► William Coffrin, program manager—asbestos/lead, DEQ, (504) 765-0692.

Sources: Louisiana Office of Public Health and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

"Almost everybody around there was getting that scrap," Olivia Walker said. "Almost every time I looked out the door, I'd see a Johns-Manville truck going down the street."

Kenny Kempf remembered erecting a basketball net beside a patch of the pavement in his back yard.

"Nobody realized it was going to be a problem later on," he said.

But Henry Weber said he did realize, even back then, that asbestos could be dangerous. A former serviceman, he'd read as early as 1945 that the British Navy was removing asbestos from ships they'd borrowed from the United States. So when many of his neighbors were pouring the scrap on their lawns, he wanted no part of it.

"They came and backed a truck in my yard one day," Weber said. "I said, 'No, I don't want it. Get that out of my yard.'"

Still, Weber said, there was no avoiding asbestos if you lived near the Manville plant in those

days. The dust blew in the wind, got sucked into the house by window fans, formed a layer on cars.

"I had a black Ford and it looked like I had a gray Ford," he said.

Residents are particularly sensitive to the potential health risk because, they say, they know a lot of people from the area who have developed lung cancer. A number of the women at the Marrero meeting Thursday had lost husbands who had worked at the Manville plant to cancer. Manville, a nationwide corporation, declared bankruptcy in 1982, overwhelmed by claims from employees who said their health had been damaged by asbestos.

Gussie Weber, Henry's wife and a lifelong Marrero resident, lost her sister and her first husband to lung cancer. Now her daughter has it.

"She was raised right around here. She never went anywhere else," she said. "And now she comes down with this on her lungs."